

# The Chief of Staff's Book of the Quarter

## The First Air War, 1914-1918, by Lee Kennett



Drawing on official records, scholarly works, diaries, correspondence, memoirs, and oral histories, Lee Kennett examines air power, both lighter and heavier-than-air

aircraft, during World War I. He focuses on three aspects of this first air war - the various missions these aircraft, primarily the airplane, flew and their changing roles throughout the war; the way air power was perceived and harnessed by commanders; and the human element of air combat.

Throughout the war, the role of aircraft changed and evolved according to the needs of the pilots and corps commanders. The airplane was totally new to most commanders. Both the army and navy struggled to find its best use. Kennett argues the primary purpose of aircraft was reconnaissance and observation. This was the most successful role of the airplane and balloon. It warned of any movement or change in the enemy camp, and sometimes could predict an enemy's offensive strategies. **Airplanes were best utilized when used in conjunction with the artillery.** The supreme killing device of World War I was the artillery shell, and artillery was often directed and guided from the eyes of an observation plane overhead.

The bomber was a disappointment for most commands. Even though technology improved regarding bombs and planes, the distance aircraft could fly was a limiting factor, especially in the beginning. The physical damage that leaders expected never really occurred. Also, bombing failed to demoralize troops and the civilian sector as was hoped. The French and the Italians gave up bombing missions quickly, while the British and the Germans continued throughout the war.

The fighter played something of an ambivalent role. As an escort to a bomber or observation plane it was mostly defensive; however, the fighter later developed a close air support function for the infantry. But, this mission too was not very effective and resulted in heavy casualties for pilot and machine.

This new element of warfare started out as a very small aspect, but it grew incrementally, sometimes exponentially. Commanders were unsure how air power could be utilized. Oftentimes, the linkages between air and ground were developed through trial and error. However, by the end of 1916, air support for an offensive

was sufficiently important for an attack to be postponed if the planes could not fly.

Not only did the roles of men and machine change throughout the war, but also the machine itself was transformed. By 1918, the speed of aircraft had doubled, and so had the ceiling, while horsepower had quadrupled and their load had greatly increased. The demand for more and better aircraft (higher, faster, farther, greater payloads, etc.) went spiraling up. Resources, money, materials, and lives were committed lavishly, and sometimes recklessly. Serious defects were not discovered until models became operational. However, many technological breakthroughs occurred, such as the machine gun-synchronizing system (where the gun was timed to fire through the arc of the propeller blade), air-to-air rockets, the fixed aircraft motor, and the mechanical starter.

With the advent of this new machine in combat, Kennett argues that a new kind of man was created to fly it. Countries looked for men who were brave, proud, independent, and strong to be pilots, especially fighter pilots. Schools were created. Many men had difficulty with the pace and the frantic activity that went into training. However, once a pilot earned his wings, life changed for him dramatically. There was a stark contrast between a soldier in the trenches and a pilot in the air. A pilot was a new kind of hero, especially the aces. Kennett likens these men to Medieval Knights in the air. Oftentimes, the soldier never saw his enemy, whereas, the pilot for the most part did. Many of these men became lionized. While everyone tried to forget the hell of the trenches, the air war lived on in folklore. Men like Manfred von Richthofen (Red Baron), Billy Bishop, Max Immelmann, and Eddie Rickenbacker became legends.

Finally, although Kennett believes the airplane played a minor role in World War I, it did have a lasting impact. Early airpower helped push the services to create an independent air force. Furthermore, it showed military leaders the need to investigate how to best exploit this resource.

To learn more about this era, please visit:  
[http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/early\\_years/ey.htm](http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/early_years/ey.htm)

**Editor's Note:** *Each quarter, one of the books from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force's Reading List will be spot-lighted as the book of the quarter. Air Force members of all ranks and grades are encouraged to read the featured title available at all Air Force libraries. For details on forming a book discussion group visit the CSAF's Reading List web site: <http://www.af.mil/readinglist>.*